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Idaho kids beat much of nation in test scores

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Idaho fourth- and eighth-graders continued to outperform students in most other states in reading and math, according to nationwide tests scores released Wednesday.

In math, Idaho's fourth-graders perform better compared to the nation than do Idaho's eighth-graders. That relative performance may be more evidence that Idaho middle schools face a challenge in producing kids ready for a rigorous high school curriculum. Local and state educators already are looking at ways to beef up student performance in middle and high schools.

Idaho fourth-graders are near the top of the country in average scores for reading and math, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Only four states are higher in fourth-grade math, and eight states higher in reading.

"Fourth-grade math was extraordinary," said Bert Stoneberg, Idaho's NAEP coordinator.

But by eighth grade, Idaho fell behind 12 other states in reading and 13 other states in math.

The performance slump between fourth and eighth grades as measured by NAEP's math test mirrors statewide achievement test results that show 90 percent of eighth-graders proficient in math, compared to just 70 percent of 10th-graders.

Nationwide test results are another indicator of the math challenges that have led Idaho educators to look for better ways to train middle school math teachers. Those efforts include the State Board of Education's push for more rigorous instruction in middle and high schools, state officials said.

Almost no state improved its reading performance significantly in either grade, and some states saw declines. In math, several states got better, especially at fourth grade.

Black and Hispanic students narrowed the achievement gap with whites in reading and math nationally.

In Idaho, eighth-grade Hispanic students improved compared to white students in math, according to NAEP, which describes students in those terms. Eighth-grade

low-income students improved in math compared to students who are not low-income.

Schools face unprecedented pressure across the nation under President Bush's No Child Left Behind law to improve achievement by minorities.

In Idaho, NAEP results show:

- Idaho's higher scores compared to other states may be affected by the relatively small number of minorities in the state. Minority students often don't perform as well on achievement tests as whites for a variety of social, educational and economic reasons.
- Average scores in reading and math for Idaho's white eighth-grade students are lower than those of their counterparts across the country. Twenty-four states had higher average test scores in math for eighth-grade white students; 13 were about the same and a dozen were lower. The bottom line: White students in Idaho perform about the same as white students across the country.

Idaho's lower math scores could reflect instruction that tends to emphasize computation over understanding math concepts and problem-solving, said Jonathan Brendefur, a BSU education professor who focuses on math education.

The NAEP eighth-grade test relies heavily on students knowing how to apply math concepts such as when to multiply or divide, and not just how to do the computation.

Math education must do more to focus on "the ability for kids to actually solve realistic problems and know what type of mathematics to use," Brendefur said.

Idaho has worked on math instruction by sponsoring math academies for middle school teachers. So far, the state has trained about 400 teachers in the weeklong summer sessions. But the state has about 1,000 teachers that need the training, said Marilyn Howard, state superintendent of public instruction. Howard is asking the state for \$1.5 million to do more training with middle school math teachers, including pre-algebra and algebra 1 instruction.

Boosting middle-schoolers' math ability is leading Boise School District to consider adding a new achievement test in fourth, fifth and sixth grades to determine exactly where the breakdown in math instruction occurs.

By contrast, fourth-grade results are much more positive. The scores reflect Idaho's concentration on improving elementary school education in recent years

by starting a variety of programs from initiatives to boost reading to statewide achievement testing in math and language, state department officials say.

"I am encouraged by the strong performance of our fourth-graders, especially in math," Howard said in a statement.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Bill Roberts at broberts@idahostatesman.com or 377-6408.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.